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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001171

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
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P FOR HMUSTAPHA AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MINISTER HARIRI ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT HER
PORTFOLIO

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William K. Grant for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In an August 8 courtesy call by Charge, Minister of Education Bahiya Hariri told us that she hopes to create standardized curricula for Lebanon's public schools. In addition, she plans to push for greater community involvement in the educational process. A longtime MP from the southern city of Sidon, Hariri said the mood there is calm, but there is underlying concern about the Ain al Hilwe Palestinian refugee camp. In her view, long-term stability in Sidon and the rest of Lebanon is the only way to eliminate extremism. She believes President Sleiman's management to date has been wise and called him "reasonable." Hariri did not view her as special her role as one of few women in parliament, and the only female cabinet member. She is optimistic more women will become involved in politics in Lebanon. Hariri is the sister of the late PM Rafiq Hariri, aunt of Rafiq's son, current majority leader MP Saad Hariri and mother of Saad's aide Nader Hariri. End summary.

BUILDING SCHOOLS, BUILDING CURRICULA

2. (C) Newly-appointed Minister of Education, and sister of assassinated former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Bahiya Hariri told Charge Grant, accompanied by USAID Acting Director, Poloff, and Senior LES Political Advisor, she has two goals for the Ministry of Education. One of her first priorities is to begin studying the gap between needs and skills in order to create standardized curricula for Lebanon's 1,453 public schools. She said her vision is to raise the level of education in Lebanon's schools from the primary to university levels by expanding programs to link schools with the international community. A standardized curricula, that meets accreditation standards, is the vehicle through which to do so.

3. (C) More immediately, she noted that many schools are in need of rehabilitation and construction. According the Hariri, 71 schools already have been identified to undergo physical improvements with the aim of having the schools ready to open on time for the start of the academic year that begins in late August. In addition to the physical improvements, Hariri said she would like to increase community involvement in the education system by creating

neighborhood committees comprised of parents, teachers, private sector figures, and other stakeholders (akin to a PTA) to monitor and work with local schools. She believes the system not only suffers inequities between rural and urban schools, but inequities exist between individual schools as well. The neighborhood committee would provide a way to diminish the disparities she said.

SIDON CALM

14. (C) Hariri assessed the current security situation in southern city of Sidon, which she represents in parliament, as calm but with underlying tension. She said that violence in July in and around the Ain Al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp could have been worse if different factions within the camp had not stepped in to mediate. The residents of Sidon she believes, feel progress has been made in the relationship between Palestinians in and near the camp and Lebanese, as well as between Shia and Sunni Lebanese residents of Sidon. However, Hariri commented that investing in the long-term stability of Sidon and by extension the rest of Lebanon, is the only way to eliminate extremist sentiment.

POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE IS "HEALTHY"

15. (C) Hariri was generally optimistic about the atmosphere of debate occurring in the cabinet of the new national unity government. She called President Sleiman's management of the government "wise," despite his difficult position. She

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believes that everyone accepts his presidency and called him "reasonable."

16. (C) Hariri is the only woman cabinet member and one of few women in parliament. She said she did not feel she had a "special role," and had never endured discrimination in her political life. She defined her role as one that paves the way for others and builds capacity. She pointed with pride to the work of the Rafiq Hariri Foundation's projects to encourage greater female, and male, participation in media and politics.

COMMENT

16. (C) Despite being the aunt of March 14 leader Saad Hariri, Bahiya Hariri is not a full member of March 14. In the past she has alternated her political affiliations between Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and running as an independent.

Hariri is an educator by profession, and appeared to care deeply about the educational issues she discussed.

GRANT